

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH U.S. ARMY MAJOR GENERAL
SIMEON G. TROMBITAS, DEPUTY COMMANDER, JOINT TASK FORCE-HAITI, VIA
TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: OPERATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOINT TASK FORCE-
HAITI OVER THE LAST FOUR MONTHS AND THE WAY AHEAD TIME: 11:00 A.M. EDT
DATE: WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 2010

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MOLLY A. BURGESS (Office of the Secretary of Defense-Public
Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of
Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, May 12, 2010.

My name is MC1 Molly A. Burgess with the Office of the Secretary
of Defense-Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers online today: Please remember to clearly
state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question.

Also, as respect to our guest's time, please keep all questions
succinct and to the point. Before I start, we had a caller come on. Can
I ask who that was?

Q Yes, it's Nathan Hodge with Wired.com.

MS. BURGESS: Great. Thank you, Nathan. Just so you know,
you're number third in line. Thank you.

Today, our guest is U.S. Army Major General Simeon Trombitas,
deputy commander of Joint Task Force Haiti, and he'll be discussing the
operations and contributions of the Joint Task Force Haiti over the past
four months as Joint Task Force Haiti begins its stand-down. We're
pleased to have our guest today.

And, Major General, if you have any opening remarks, you can go
ahead.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Hi. Good morning. It's a pleasure to be able
to speak with you all today.

Once again, I'm Major General Simeon Trombitas, and I'm the
commanding general of Joint Task Force Haiti, as well as the commanding

general of U.S. Army South based out of Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas.

I arrived here in Haiti on the 9th of March. I served initially as a deputy commanding general of the JTF under Lieutenant General Keen. I became the commanding general on the 18th of April after his departure back to the United States Southern Command.

As was mentioned also, recently, news reports have made it known that the Joint Task Force here is standing down, and as the situation in Haiti is stabilized and reconstruction is ongoing, we will transition, and the military's role in Haiti will become more in alignment with the more traditional United States Southern Command theater security cooperation activities that ensure our enduring relationship with Haiti and the Haitian people.

With that, I'm available to take your questions.

MS. BURGESS: Great. Thank you, sir.

With that, we'll go straight into the first caller, and that was you, Dale. Go ahead.

Q Good morning, sir. This is Dale Kissinger from MilitaryAvenue.com. How are you today? We're glad you could take the time to talk to us.

My quick question is on when is the actual stand-down date going to occur, and when you do leave, what are we leaving behind in Haiti?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Thanks for your question, Dale. Nice to talk to you. We will actually stand down the Joint Task Force on the 1st of June. That is when I will take the last elements of United States Army South home and send those sister services personnel back to their home stations.

What we will transition to is a SOUTHCOM coordination cell of about eight people that will stay here in Port-au-Prince to liaise and coordinate with the lead agency, the United States Agency for International Development, and continue that relationship. And also we'll conduct a traditional theater security cooperation exercise called New Horizons that will bring in about 500 soldiers from the Louisiana National Guard predominantly, but also some soldiers from the Arizona, Montana, Nevada, Puerto Rican and Virgin Island National Guards, and they will remain here and cycle through during a period from 1 June 'til the end of September conducting engineering activities and also medical readiness training exercises in the vicinity of Gonaives which is north of Port-au-Prince.

Q Thank you very much.

MS. BURGESS: Great. Thank you, sir.

Tyler, go ahead. Tyler, are you still online with us?

Okay. We'll go ahead to Nathan. Go ahead.

Q Good morning, General. This is Nathan Hodge with Wired.com. Good to speak to you again.

I'd like to see if you could just walk us through a little bit sort of how the JTF evolved just for our readers to give a sense of the scale of it. As its height, how many -- how many troops were a part of the JTF?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Sure, Nathan. I'll do that.

You know, starting from the very beginning. I think you're aware that Lieutenant General Keen, who's the deputy at Southern Command, was here in country in Haiti on a regular visit when the earthquake occurred on the 12th of January. He was able to make a quick assessment and immediately notified SOUTHCOM of what the situation was. A disaster assistance relief team was dispatched, and we started flowing forces in shortly thereafter.

The largest number of United States forces in Haiti rose to over 22,000 personnel. Of those, about 14,000 were in ships at sea, both Naval and Coast Guard vessels off the coast contributing to the relief effort, and we had at that time about 53 helicopters, and numerous aircraft flew in and out of Haiti. We had about 8,000 soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen, and Coast Guardsmen on the ground at any given time during the height of operations. We're downsized now, and today we have about 850 servicemembers on the ground in Haiti. Our mission has and remains to save lives, alleviate human suffering, and then transition into mitigating the ill effects of weather. During the first month, we were focused -- very focused on saving lives and getting -- flowing those things in that would help us doing that, getting food, water, shelter in to the Haitian people, and ensuring that the immediate effects of the earthquake were alleviated by that quick action.

Then we started transitioning into ensuring that they were protected from the weather and also saving their lives from fast water, from mudslides, and things like that.

We were a part with other government agencies and USAID and non-government agencies in identifying nine at-risk camps from which we moved about 8,000 internally displaced persons to relocation camps, again to preserve their life and mitigate the ill effects of weather. We looked at those nine camps and did some engineering projects in those camps to include putting up retaining walls, putting in drainage symptoms, laying down gravel that assisted and preserved lives in those camps.

Now, we have done those things that was necessary to meet the goals and objectives of that first phase, and we are transitioning into those traditional theater security activities that will maintain our presence here and further establish our enduring relationship with the Haitian people.

Q Sir, if I may follow, you have said that this is going to transition to a more traditional SOUTHCOM type of mission. Could you just elaborate a little bit for our readers what traditional security cooperation in the hemisphere typically looks like?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Sure. Throughout the hemisphere, one of the things we do to maintain contact with, from the Army South perspective, other armies, and then, from the JTF perspective, with the militaries of other nations, are conducting exercises such as New Horizons which will - we will conduct here.

That exercise will comprise four engineering projects in and around Gonaives, Haiti, in which we will reconstruct four schools, build a fourth -- I'm sorry. We will reconstruct three schools, build a fourth school. We'll drill some wells, put in some latrines.

And while that engineering activity is going on, we will rotate on a 10-day period 10 different medical readiness training exercises whereas we deploy medical personnel, dental personnel, veterinarians and the associated technicians to a country to get training for our own personnel to become culturally aware of the activities in that partner nation to learn our region, as well as bringing good medical help to the folks in that partner nation normally in areas that aren't usually afforded the opportunity for that good medical care. Just to give an example, as we gear up for the transition here in Haiti, we are -- or have conducted those same type of exercises in Colombia, in Panama, in Guatemala, in Nicaragua and Honduras during the time period that we've been in Haiti.

Q Thank you.

MS. BURGESS: Great. Thank you, Nathan.

Dale, if you want to go ahead with another question.

Q Yes, sir. How -would the JTF measure its success in Haiti, how many lives saved, efforts put in, and things of those natures?

GEN. TROMBITAS: You know, that's a very good question. How do we measure success?

I don't think numbers could speak to the success we have had here. I think we measure success in a number of ways to include -- you know, our first success was the incredible flexibility of our military from being able to go from combat operations to flex to a humanitarian assistant disaster relief mission, and our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen were very successful in rapidly moving into a country in dire conditions, saving lives, and assisting in the reconstruction of that country.

We, as I said, identified nine camps that we believed were at risk, and the, I think, total population of those nine camps was probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 100,000 folks. We did those -- conducted those activities that ensured that their lives would be

preserved from the ill effects of weather. Our main concerns were fast rushing water after hard rains and mudslides. We moved approximately 8,000 people to better locations to preserve their lives.

Our servicemembers have formed a bond with the Haitian people that I think is immeasurable. As I've told -- I've had the opportunity to speak to all of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen as they leave country, and I tell each one of them that our success is measured in how the Haitian people see the United States effort, and I think that effort is seen and remembered by the Haitians not as symbols of America, but as the faces of those servicemembers that helped them, that passed out a ration, that gave them water, that carried a sick child to a medical facility, that held their hands and gave them guidance, and I think our success is measured and will be continued to measure -- be measured in those things that we have done here and how the Haitian people remember us.

Q Well, thank you very much. That was perfect.

MS. BURGESS: Thank you, Dale. Nathan, if you want to go ahead.

Q Sir, just one more question. Could you give us a brief snapshot of the security situation in Haiti as you see it?

GEN. TROMBITAS: You know, I will tell you we -- the only security we were involved with here was securing the sites that were distribution sites for other agencies. Right now, in terms of what we are -- you know, we're not involved in the security side of the house. That is MINUSTAH, the United Nations missions here. But as we move around the country, the security here in terms of our ability to move, the people's ability to be safe is very stable.

I know that MINUSTAH 's presence here provides for that stability. I know that every day they are taking an active role in doing those things, such as patrolling, demonstrating a presence in the camps, in the outlying areas, that brings stability to the country and maintain that stability.

Again, in talking to the commander of MINUSTAH, General Ron Paul Cruz, he makes some very interesting points. You know, we're coming up on elections here. He wants to provide an atmosphere in which the Haitians can be free to express their political views. They will secure those sites to ensure that peaceful demonstrations are allowed to happen.

In terms of overall security, again, it's very stable here. Our personnel are able to move around, do the things we have to do, and the Haitian people, I think, are very secure in their ability to return to life after the earthquake as it was before. Everywhere you go on the streets are -- is activity. The merchants are doing their selling. People are moving around, doing what they did prior to the earthquake, and everything is back to what it was before.

Q Thank you.

MS. BURGESS: Great. Thank you, Nathan.

Dale, did you have any other questions?

Q I do. General, one of the challenges we faced with, obviously, transportation getting into the country through damaged ports and the airport with one runway. How would you say we've left those areas for the Haitians to use in the future?

GEN. TROMBITAS: I think everything we've done here has enhanced the capability overall. You know, fortunately, the runway was functional. The trouble was with the air control. When the earthquake first happened, we quickly got to our special ops folks and then the regular Air Force to come in here and control the airflow in and out, and then that was turned over to the Haitians, and I will tell you that the airflow is back to normal. I see American Airlines and others come in here every day, a number of cargo flights, a number of personnel flights, and I think that we have transitioned back to normal air traffic into Haiti.

As you mentioned, the pier was damaged. We had dive teams from both the Navy and the Army working together to make an assessment of the pier, and -- excuse me -- then to repair that pier facility, and it, too, I think is back to pre-earthquake standards and, as you go by the waterfront, the activity on the pier is what it was before the earthquake.

I think that we have, through a combined effort with other government agencies and with the government of Haiti, repaired all of that portion of the infrastructure to pre-earthquake states and made it even better.

Q Thank you.

MS. BURGESS: Thank you, Dale.

Nathan, did you have another question?

Q No, no further questions at this point.

MS. BURGESS: Okay. Dale, did you have any further questions?

Q No, I think that's it. I've covered the Haitian roundtables about 20 times, and I just wanted to say thank you to the general for making all the commanders and other personnel available to do these roundtables.

MS. BURGESS: Thank you.

Okay. With that then, thank you all. We've had some great questions and comments today.

As we wrap -- as we wrap up today's call, I'd like to ask Major General if you have any final comments you would like to add.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Yeah. You know, in reply to Dale on making people available, I really want to thank you all for the opportunity to speak to you because I want to tell you that our servicemembers have really done great things in Haiti. I wish -- I know that you have seen some of the photographs of what we were able to accomplish here, and I think we as a military have the gratitude of America, of the Haitian people, and of the United States government and all the NGOs down here.

Our servicemembers have really worked tirelessly at saving lives and mitigating the suffering of those Haitians affected by this earthquake. I think that we on the ground have been able to witness a remarkable resiliency in the Haitian people and their ability to pick themselves up, rebuild and continue their lives. I know that in the coming weeks and months that exercise New Horizons is going to maintain our relationship with Haiti and the Haitian people, and it will also allow our continued support of USAID, who is the lead agent, and other government agencies in this reconstruction effort.

I thank you all for allowing us the opportunity to speak with you.

Q General, can I ask you a question before we leave?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Yeah. Go ahead.

Q Yeah. This is Philippe (ph) from Voice of America in Washington, D.C.

Okay. I would like to ask you from a political point of view the -- (inaudible) -- about elections now. How is the situation in -- (inaudible) --

GEN. TROMBITAS: Hello?

MS. BURGESS: Hello?

Q Yeah. The question was, from a political point of view, do you think the country's ready for the election. What -- the election -- from a security point of view, is the country ready for election now?

GEN. TROMBITAS: You know, I -- that really falls without the -- out of the purview of what we've been charged to do. As we've spoke here, we're winding our mission down, and that was a humanitarian relief and -- humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mission, and I think that question would be better asked of someone that is an expert in that area.

Q Thank you, General.

MS. BURGESS: Okay. Thank you, General. We --

GEN. TROMBITAS: And again --

MS. BURGESS: Oh, go ahead. Go ahead, sir.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Just in closing, again, I want to tell you how much I appreciate the sacrifice made by all of our servicemembers and their families because we are a military that's in constant movement and this was a very unexpected event. And, as I told you, our flexibility in responding to it does have a price for those that participate in terms of their time with their families because they will probably leave here and go on to other activities that will carry them back to situations outside of the United States. I am extremely proud to have led them and served alongside them as we help the people of Haiti on the road to recovery. And thank you for your support of our servicemembers. I hope you all have a good day.

MS. BURGESS: Thank you, sir.

And thank you, gentlemen, very much.

Today's program will be available online at Bloggers Roundtable -- on the Blogger Roundtable link on dodlive.mail where you will be able to access the story based on today's call along with source documents, such as their bios and audio files and the print transcript.

And, again, thank you, Major General, for being online.

And thank you for all the blogger participants.

This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time.

END.